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Unknown Soldier Centennial

Much in the press recently has been the Centennial of the selection and burial of the Unknown Soldier. The British and French were the first to establish a commemoration for their Unknown Soldier. On 11 November 1920 the British unknown soldier was interred in Westminster Abbey in London and the French unknown soldier was interred underneath the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. The American Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was established one year later. On 24 October 1921, Sergeant Edward Younger of the 2nd Infantry Division selected the unknown soldier in the entrance hall of the town hall at what was then known as Chalons sur Marne in France. One American unknown from the Aisne Marne, Somme, Meuse Argonne, and St Mihiel cemeteries had been disinterred and brought here for the ceremony. After selection, the designated unknown was transported from Chalons sur Marne, to Paris, Le Havre, and then via the ship the Olympia to the Washington Naval Yard and then to Arlington. He was buried on 11 November 1921. Today, there is a plaque in the entrance hall of the town hall in Chalons en Champagne where the selection was made. Co-located with the French unknown tomb in Paris is a large bronze Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) emblem commemorating the liberation of Paris on 25 August 1944. The French hold a daily ceremony at 6:30pm underneath the Arc de Triomphe to relight the eternal flame that burns there. (Sometimes large and elaborate, sometimes small and intimate, the ceremony is open to the public and worth your time on your next visit to Paris.)



More about unknowns.....

An Unknown Soldier is a wartime burial of a combatant whose remains that have not been identified. After our Civil War, approximately one in four of the 750,000 soldiers killed were buried as unknowns in unnamed graves. In our World War I overseas cemeteries, the American Battle Monuments Commission has 1645 headstones with the inscription: Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God. (This is also the inscription on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington.) Due to the joint nature of WWII, for the 2741 unknown WWII headstones in ABMC cemeteries, the inscription was changed to: Here rests in honored glory a Comrade in Arms known but to God. Less than 2% of our fallen were unknown soldiers in WWI, WWII, and the Korean War. Thanks to increasingly sophisticated technology, an unknown soldier is becoming rare. The burial in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier representing the Vietnam war was disinterred and identified as 1LT Blassie in 1998 and that tomb remains empty. There was not a single unknown soldier in the Persian Gulf war or in recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. A related issue is that of combatants who are Missing in Action: they have disappeared, presumably killed, but no remains were recovered. The two issues are closely related, of course, as some of the over 55,000 names honored as Missing in Action in ABMC cemeteries could very well be buried there as unknowns. When the remains of someone honored on the Wall of the Missing are found, the name is not removed, it is marked with a bronze asterisk. Our Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command continues to try to account for every missing American casualty.

